Family Systems Theories of Substance Abuse

Psychology 470
Introduction to Chemical Addictions
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**Background**

- It has been observed that alcoholism runs in families for several centuries.
- The question is why
  - Genetic Theories Nature
  - Learned Behavior Nurture
- Minimal research on other substances

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**Family Systems**

- Will focus on alcoholism
- Contends that alcoholism is caused by dysfunctional family systems
- Generally uses the “traditional” family as a system.

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**Family Systems**

- Generally, people tend to marry people similar to themselves
  - Same SES, Education, racial groups, racial groups, etc.
- Also engage in similar social groups

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**Families**

- Are similar to other groups
- Undergo a variety of transitions
  - Marriage
  - Fiscal pressures in early marital years
  - Early childhood years
  - Job and location changes
  - Adolescent years
  - Children leaving home
  - Others

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**Many Aspects of Being in a Family**

- Have a variety of different psychological and sociological systems that occur
  - Parental Modeling and Parental styles
  - Triangulation
  - Communication issues
  - Fiscal pressures
  - Emotional stability
Elements of Family Systems

- Each family system has
  - Rules
  - Ways of communication
    - Verbal and Non-Verbal
  - Shared values
  - Boundaries
  - Patterns of interaction

Result

- In normal systems there is a balance
  - There is ebb and flow among the units
  - Family tries to reach a state of homeostasis
- Imbalanced systems
  - Are out of balance
  - Families must compensate for the imbalance

Dysfunctional vs. Imbalanced

- Dysfunctional
  - First described by Ackerman
  - Used to describe relationships, parenting, behavior, individuals, other
  - Is often shame-based and used in a negative connotation
  - Often used in a labeling context
    - You have a codependent, enabling, dysfunctional relationship with your spouse
    - Does not help the person
    - May make the person feel hopeless, ashamed, etc.

Imbalanced

- First described by Satir
- Uses a mobile model
  - Shift the mobile, everything changes
- Has a better connotation
  - Is easier to perceive a change if the system is imbalanced vs. dysfunctional

Family Contributions to Addiction

Many Ideas and Models

- Communication problems
- Difficulty or a reduction of intimacy
- Fears of being abandoned or smothered
- Issues of emotionality
- Family learning/modeling/reinforcement
Communication
- "What We Have Here is a Failure to Communicate"
- Persons have difficulty communicating with other in the family
- Find that when you drink booze, you become less shy, more talkative, can communicate better.
- Also causes more aggressive behavior
- Increased tolerance, need more booze
- Results in more problems
- Communication cannot occur unless you are drinking

Problem
- Communication problems also occur when you are drinking
- Cannot conduct a rational conversation with a person who has been drinking
- Cannot do therapy with a person who is drinking
- At high levels, person does not even recall what you said.

Conclusions
- Communication issues can contribute to family issues and addiction problems
- Probably does not cause the addiction

Intimacy, Abandonment, Emotionality

Initially
- Alcohol/Drug use is used to facilitate to the interpersonal relationship
- Can be seen in dating rituals
- Can be seen for discussions within the relationship.
  - Need a drink so we can "open up"
- Problem
  - Increased tolerance

Later
- Need more substances to "communicate"
- Need more substances to "dull the pain" in the relationship
- Result
  - Increased consumption
  - Decrease or problems in communication
  - Creates balance problems within the family
Result

• Family stresses increase
• Family dysfunction increases
• Develops into a cycle.
  • Problems increase
  • More consumption of compounds
  • More problems

Family Members

• Initially assist with the development of the use and dependence
• Help maintain the dependence
• Can hinder the recovery of the individual

Analysis

• No doubt families have an impact on addiction and recovery
• Is correlated with addiction
• Does not mean families cause the addiction.

Other Problems

• How do you explain adolescent addiction Family modeling
  • Adolescent observes use among parents
  • Engages in those behaviors
  • Does not explain use/addiction when parents do not drink.
  • Can explain how drinking in some societies remains low

Conclusions

• Families have an impact on the addictions process.
  • Families probably do not cause the addiction process
  • Are correlated with the process
• Families also have an impact on recovery
• Families often experience great stress when a member becomes an abuser or dependent